

Love and Death

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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What on earth shall we sing?

What shall we sing in wonder at the gift of life?

What shall we sing in awe at the mystery of death?

With what song shall we shout our joy and keen our sorrow in all the days between?

In the ancient story of the creation in the Jewish and Christian traditions, humans are created from the clay and made alive with a breath from God. Genesis 2:7 reads “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

If our life moves from ashes to ashes and dust to dust, our days then move from breath to breath. From our first gasping cry when we enter this world, until our last rattling breath as we leave it – our breath marks the rhythm of our days and the countdown of our time for this life, in all its finite glory.

As we move through these moments and days, each breath we take must be spent – whether in song, or in laughter, speech, sigh, or sob. If we hold our breath too long, we die. Use it or lose it.

In and out, in and out.

So it is with our lives in their own rhythm - of in and out, birth and death, love and loss and love again. Our lives must be spent – if we hold them we die in spirit long before we cease to draw breath.

So what on earth shall we sing?

We would be one as now we join in singing, our song of love, to pledge ourselves anew, to that high cause of greater understanding, of who we are and what in us is true.

We *would* be one human family, singing a song of love, but all too often we are not. How can it be so?

I am reminded of this whenever I get an email from church member Diane Suhler, whose automatic signature contains a quote from John Bradshaw. Down at the bottom of each email, no matter the content, is this reminder, which says: “We are all hurling through space on a rock and we're all going to die. You would think we would be holding hands and singing.”

Thank you for that regular reminder, Diane.

You'd think so, wouldn't you? That we'd be holding hands singing. That we'd be loving the hell out of this world, every moment of every day. (Even when that means loving ourselves with a chocolate truffle.)

You'd think that on the way between dust and dust, we'd use our breaths to enjoy this world and to heal it, in somewhat equal measure. To speak words of love and sing songs of beauty – since beauty and love, both, heal and bring joy.

And much of the time we do. We do. But sometimes western culture makes this difficult. And it does so, in part, by denying death – by stubbornly insisting that we *can* hold onto life beyond limits, if only we are smart enough, or rich enough, or committed enough.

UU minister and public theologian Forrest Church always defined religion as “the human response to the dual reality that we are alive and that we know we will some day die.”

“Religion begins at the entrance to the tomb,” he used to say, as a set of practices and questions and beliefs meant to bring comfort or meaning to our lives in the face of our deaths.

But religious community and practice has been declining in the United States for decades, and alongside that decline, though perhaps not directly because of it, has grown an increasingly death-denying culture – where, instead of finding meaning in the face of death, as a culture, we simply turn our faces away.

Of course we experience death in our lives in ways large, small, and unbidden – a dear beloved has died, or a far away loved one, or we ourselves have seen death's face in a medical test or diagnosis.

The issue of death-denial is cultural, and all the more problematic when it marginalizes our own true experiences.

We see this culture in many small and large ways:

Perhaps you have trouble talking with your children about death and dying because you have little practice with such conversations or no good model in your own past.

Perhaps you do not know the end-of-life wishes of your parents or partner because the topic is taboo. Or maybe you have experienced other people's denial in their discomfort or avoidance in your own time of grief or illness.

Perhaps you have experienced a segment of medical culture, which sees death as a failure rather than a natural part of life, or a funeral industry that insulates us from encountering the bodies of deceased loved ones.

In a less obvious and thereby more insidious way, a death-denying culture seeps into the air we breathe –

In the many ways that a particular vision of youth and health is exalted, and marketed to us as something we should all desire and possess.

In a globalized culture of violence that treats human deaths as far away numbers.

In an intellectual tradition that prizes flights of mind over insights of finite, earthly bodies, including the body of the earth.

Or even in video games, where characters are reconstituted again and again for as many lives as they can earn – virtual worlds where death is neither real nor final.

I have no doubt this culture comes from an entirely natural human fear of mortality.

We fear the unknown and death is the ultimate unknown. It is mystery beyond our capacity to imagine – hard as we may try. This fear is natural – biologically and spiritually.

But the thing is, when we distance ourselves from encounters with death and dying in our lives, it only becomes more unknown to us – and thus more frightening.

I have found this to be true for myself – being in the presence of death has diminished my fears and brought me both peace and a more poignantly fierce love of life.

My childhood struggles with the idea of mortality played a large part in my calling to ministry – I needed to turn and face life and death and to dive deep in the meaning, there to be found. And it is exactly in that work, close to death as ministers are privileged to be, that I have found affirmation of life and deep faith in a love that transcends it.

It turns out that denying death, in truth, denies life as well. As Forrest Church points out in this morning's reading – as the unique organisms that we are, we cannot have one without the other. They are of a piece – this life and its end. Denying one only serves to drain the other of its preciousness.

In his poetic book *The Accidental Universe*, physicist Alan Lightman ponders just this. He asks:

Does mortality grant a beauty and grandeur all its own? Even though we struggle and howl against the brief flash of our lives, might we find something majestic in that brevity? Could there be a preciousness and value to existence stemming from the very fact of its temporary duration?

I think of the night-blooming cereus, a plant that looks like a leathery weed most of the year. But for one night each summer its flower opens to reveal silky white petals, which encircle yellow lacelike threads, and another whole flower like a tiny sea anemone within the outer flower. By morning, the flower has shriveled. One night of the year, as delicate and fleeting as a life in the universe.

Would we deny that brief flash of beauty, for its transience? Or would we embrace it all the more?

Here in our religious community we have the chance to choose the embrace.

Here we hold hands and sing every single week. And we remember that life is short and beautiful and oh, so precious.

Through this recollection, we can live together more closely aware of the cycles of life and death in our lives, and so doing become more attuned to the wonder of life and the power of love eternal.

Like Forrest Church, I am agnostic about the idea of afterlife. I believe that after we've beaten the wildly improbable odds of existing at all, anything is possible. I also believe it is a great mystery, what awaits us as we draw our last breaths. Peace, rest, beyond that who knows? It is beyond my capacity to even imagine, though God knows I've tried – my mind refusing to humbly admit defeat in the quest to know ALL.

What I can imagine, because I see it all around me, is the core of our faith that while Life is finite and thereby precious, her sister Love lives on always.

I have seen a child's life changed by gentle care and horror transformed by human kindness and invention spurred on by compassion and pain.

The choice to love altars our world in a way that is permanent and ongoing.

Near the time of his own death, Forrest Church wrote to his loved ones in assurance. "Death may come as a thief in the night, but it cannot steal from you the love you have given, the strength you have shown in facing life's hardships, or the courage you have proved in quelling your inner demons. [...] Today's works of love and acts of conscience weave themselves into a plot that will continue long after you are gone, yet be changed for the better by your deeds when you were here." (p. 95)

He continues: "Life may not be immortal, but love is immortal. It's every gesture signs the air with honor. Its witness carries past the grave from heart to heart."

That is why it is time to wake up – wake up to the preciousness of life and the mandate of love. This is the day we are given, the only one we are guaranteed.

This is the day to re-center our lives in the cycles of nature – the cycles of birth and death and re-birth, the cycles of hope, fear, love, loss, and love again.

This is the day to love what is fleeting and create what lasts. Today.

After years of experience and conversation with dying people, palliative care nurse Bronnie Ware compiled a list of the five regrets she heard most, at the end of life. They were as follows.

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard and had spent time with loved ones instead.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

5. I wish I had let myself be happier.

I hope you're not surprised... they're all about love. Love of self, love of neighbor, love of this beautiful, terrible life itself. The love that is our greatest legacy and our eternal reward, here and now and forever, when we give it freely.

So how shall we use these breaths we are given?

With gasps and shouts and laughs and songs of wonder.

With words and cries and sighs and tears of love, which echo on, always.

And of course we could do worse than to spend a few on poetry.

I close with a poem from Mary Oliver called When Death Comes...

When death comes □ like the hungry bear in autumn □

when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps his purse shut; □

when death comes □ like the measles-pox;

when death comes □ like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering; □

what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything □

as a brotherhood and a sisterhood, □

and I look upon time as no more than an idea, □

and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower,

as common □ as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth □

tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage,

and something □ precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement. □

I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder □

if I have made of my life something particular, and real. □

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened □ or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.